9

Positive Art Therapy

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"*I hate this and you!" shouted the self-proclaimed ringleader of my art therapy group for male teenagers in an addiction treatment unit. Though pummeled with insults, abrasive comments, and derogatory remarks, I insisted on maintaining the group for the duration of the time originally contracted. "How am I going to survive this?" I thought as I stared at the provocative sculpture of a dead tree just completed by the most hostile member of the group (see Figure 9.1).*

As a novice art therapist, I was convinced that I would have to "tough it out," regardless of the situation until the full hour was up. With that belief system, I set myself and the group members up for a disastrous experience. I later realized that, during the group, the patients were letting me know through their abusive behavior that they were not ready to allow the art making and group process to alleviate their suffering. On the contrary, my decision to continue the group served to reinforce and extend the painful proceedings, which, in turn, extended the negativity. Consequently, there were no opportunities for them to increase their insight and or sense a feeling of accomplishment. Had I chosen not to continue the group further, I could have set limits on the abusive behavior and modeled realistic consequences that result from such behavior. The focus could then have been highlighting the group's abundance of passion, energy, and creativity, which could be harnessed for collaboration and support rather than for ongoing conflict and agitation.

In 32 years of art therapy practice, I can think of several times when I wondered why I was putting myself through a particularly torturous session such as the one mentioned here. With the insight I have gained through these challenging experiences along with increased knowledge of positive psychology, I have come to realize how critical it is to first cultivate positivity and well-being in my personal and professional life. Only then can I engage my clients in discovering and promoting their own well-being. Positive psychology encompasses the notion of cultivating and sustaining a fulfilling life.

Provided in this chapter is a brief definition of positive psychology, along with a list of the five elements found to be critical to well-being and a chart identifying the six virtues and 24 "signature strengths" that support these five elements (Seligman, 2011). Three case examples—a child, an adolescent, and an adult—will illustrate the integration of positive psychology theory with art therapy practice. The intention is

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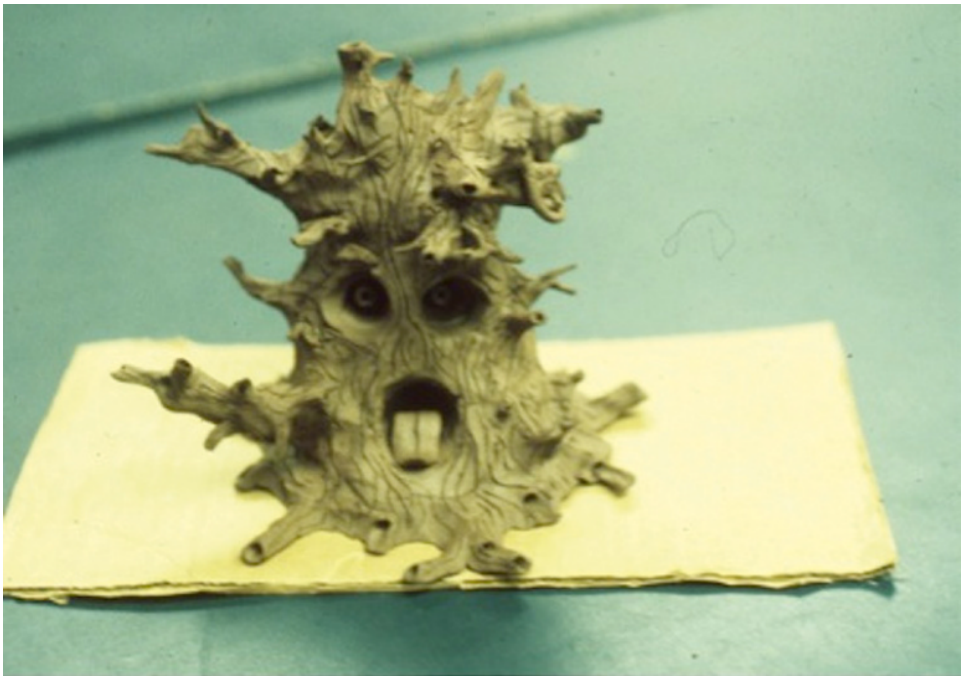

Figure 9.1 Untitled.

to inform and inspire other art therapists and related professionals to consider utilizing this approach personally and professionally. Enhancing one's own experience of living requires deliberate moment-to-moment non-judgmental self-awareness (mindfulness), self and social compassion, kindness, and a willingness to move beyond self and promote well-being globally.

Positive Psychology

Over the past two decades, Martin Seligman developed a new theory called positive psychology (2002), originally known as "*authentic happiness.*" More recently, with feedback from his students, Seligman realized that the original theory, which focused solely on authentic happiness, omitted the significance of success and mastery, as it only attended to positive mood and limited the reasons people make choices for life satisfaction. As a result, he published *Flourish: A Visionary Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* (2011), in which he provided a revised theory of what he defined as a "full life" through the increase of five measurable and distinctive elements to gain well-being and flourish. These include positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment(s) (PERMA). No individual element can characterize well-being alone. Rather, each contributes toward maximizing its construction. "The goal of positive psychology in well-being theory … is plural and importantly different: it is to increase the amount of flourishing in your own life and

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on the planet" (Seligman, 2011, p. 26). Well-being theory is focused on the PERMA model, which is further underpinned by a host of signature strengths and virtues.

Signature strengths

According to Seligman (2011), "a signature strength has … a sense of ownership and authenticity … a feeling of excitement while displaying it … and a sense of yearning to find new ways to use it … with joy, zest, enthusiasm, even ecstasy while using it" (pp. 38–39). Peterson and Seligman (2005) carefully researched "signature strengths" or measurable qualities of character that enable flourishing in life. They believed that every individual possesses many signature strengths. These are strengths of character that each person owns, celebrates, and engages in effortlessly every day, and in all aspects of life.

The authors created the Values in Action (VIA-IS) character strengths survey to accompany the Character Strengths and Virtues Handbook (CSV); both these items were developed as a positive psychology complement to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; American Psychiatric Association). While the DSM classifies and describes pathology and diagnostic identification, which is used traditionally in psychology, the CSV identifies human strengths and is designed to help one recognize and build on resources and positivity in order to make life more rewarding. The inventory identifies particular strengths, and identifies how to utilize them to enhance well-being, and successfully cope with challenges and weaknesses.[1] The data is also used to contribute to research and reliability studies. Table 9.1 provides the names and descriptions of the six virtue categories and the accompanying signature strengths.

Developing Strengths through Art Making and Art Therapy

Measuring personal signature strengths requires a genuine self-appraisal of how happy one believes he or she is presently. To promote a state of flourishing, one must start with increased self-awareness. Knowing one's strengths promotes a willingness to further expand the positivity of the strengths to enhance relationships toward self and others.

Table 9.1 Virtues and signature strengths

Wisdom/ Knowledge	*Curiosity*	*Creativity*	*Judgment*	*Love of learning*	*Perspective*
Courage	Bravery	Perseverance	Honesty	Zest	
Humanity	Love	Kindness	Social intelligence		
Justice	Teamwork	Fairness	Leadership		
Temperance	Forgiveness Mercy	Humility/ modesty	Prudence	Self-regulation	
Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty	Gratitude	Hope	Humor	**Spirituality**

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In the scenario described in the opening of this chapter, the group's focus could have been more positive by verbalizing the conflict. This would have provided an opportunity to underscore the intense emotions expressed in the session. The sculpture of the dead angry tree was a powerful piece of expression and outrage. The fact that the group member was able to create such work in the midst of so much hostility demonstrated a willingness to express his inner world and vulnerability with the group. With such knowledge, instead of regret about that group, I can now feel positive about seeing the beauty within the challenges and uncertainty of the process and outcome.

Art therapy is defined by the American Art Therapy Association (2013) as using:

> the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem. A goal in art therapy is to improve or restore a client's functioning and his or her sense of personal well-being. … Art therapy helps people resolve conflicts, improve interpersonal skills, manage problematic behaviors, reduce negative stress, and achieve personal insight. Art therapy also provides an opportunity to enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of art making. (www.americanarttherapy association.org)

It seems clear that art therapy naturally complements positive psychology. The art making process by itself gives a new perspective on how a client, group, or family might experience familiar and unique signature strengths.

Positive Art Therapy

Much like positive psychotherapy, art therapy requires "a set of techniques that are most effectively delivered with basic therapeutic essentials such as warmth, accurate empathy, basic trust, genuineness, and rapport" (Seligman, 2011, p. 40). Concurrently, a number of the exercises developed to enhance flourishing can easily be expanded upon and embellished through a therapeutic art-making directive. For example, in an initial positive psychotherapy session, the client is often invited to "write a one-page … 'positive introduction', in which one tells a concrete story showing her at her best and illustrating how she used her highest character strengths" (Seligman, 2011, p. 41). This exercise could be elaborated further in an art therapy session with a directive to create a positive self-object with any media of choice. The client would be invited to focus on the personal strengths that he or she is currently aware of and then create symbols to represent those strengths. The artwork can become a rich container of images that represent how the clients view themselves at their best in their life now.

Similarly, art therapists could offer clients another positive psychotherapy experience by asking them to create positive tangible responses with line, shape, and color to the question "what went well" (recording at least three daily things that went well). These are just two examples of positive art therapy interventions that have been effective in school settings with adolescents with emotional and behavioral difficulties and in a private office with bereaved children and adults suffering from depression. The following case examples briefly illustrate the value of positive art therapy as a catalyst for increasing feelings of well-being amidst tremendous challenges.

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Figure 9.2 Wellness painting.

Chris

In a school art therapy session, Chris (a pseudonym) admitted his desire to kill his father. As a result, he was hospitalized for homicidal ideation. He went back on psychotropic medication and returned to high school post discharge. Chris is a talented musician and artist. He actively painted and wrote songs about the demons that lived in his mind during his art therapy sessions. In an effort to help Chris view himself through a positive perspective, he was asked to paint how he felt when he was "at his best." He created Figure 9.2. Through this work, he demonstrated signature strengths of zest, vitality, appreciation of beauty and excellence, creativity, and perseverance.

Through the images of himself playing his guitar and the trust established in the therapy sessions, he was able to access and validate his strengths and abilities to gain some serenity.

In his graduation drawing (see Figure 9.3), Chris organized the composition to display the complicated and successful array of equipment he had created to record music in his bedroom. This drawing again shows his passion, curiosity, and vitality in the process of making and sharing his music and artwork. With this focus, he can find hope and acknowledgement for his creative genius and talent despite his emotional disabilities.

Allan

Allan was 9 years old when his dad abruptly died one morning. Allan was a quiet boy, and yet his artwork within private art therapy sessions allowed him to scream out his feelings safely. He later used his strengths of creativity and curiosity to illustrate a dream about his dad coming back to life. The goals established in his art therapy sessions were to give Allan a safe opportunity to express and move through his grief toward

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Figure 9.3 Termination drawing/plans after high school.

reconciliation by finding intermittent joy and well-being despite his devastating loss. Nearly a year into this process, he took up baseball. Shortly after discovering his passion for the sport, he spontaneously created a drawing with his dad as the pitcher and himself at bat. Through art, Allan comforted himself and used his vivid imagination to increase feelings of well-being in the wake of his grief. In his final art therapy session, Allan made a ceramic baseball bat and ball (see Figure 9.4).

Allan demonstrated through these symbols how he was moving toward reconciliation despite the tragic loss of his father. The artwork also served as evidence for his resilience, bravery, courage, and persistence in the wake of so much challenge.

Anna

Anna, a middle-aged woman, came to art therapy sessions privately to treat her depression. She had difficulty dealing with her demanding husband and adult son, who relied on her financially. As a result, she felt trapped and chronically agitated. Using clay, she created several sculptures over a period of 2 years, working through issues of independence, poor self-esteem, and self-acceptance. In her final ceramic piece (Figure 9.5), Anna exhibited and acknowledged her strengths of hope, creativity, spirituality, persistence, and appreciation of beauty. She realized that she did not need to financially enable her son any longer and chose instead to fortify a strong support for her marriage while growing in her own individuality.

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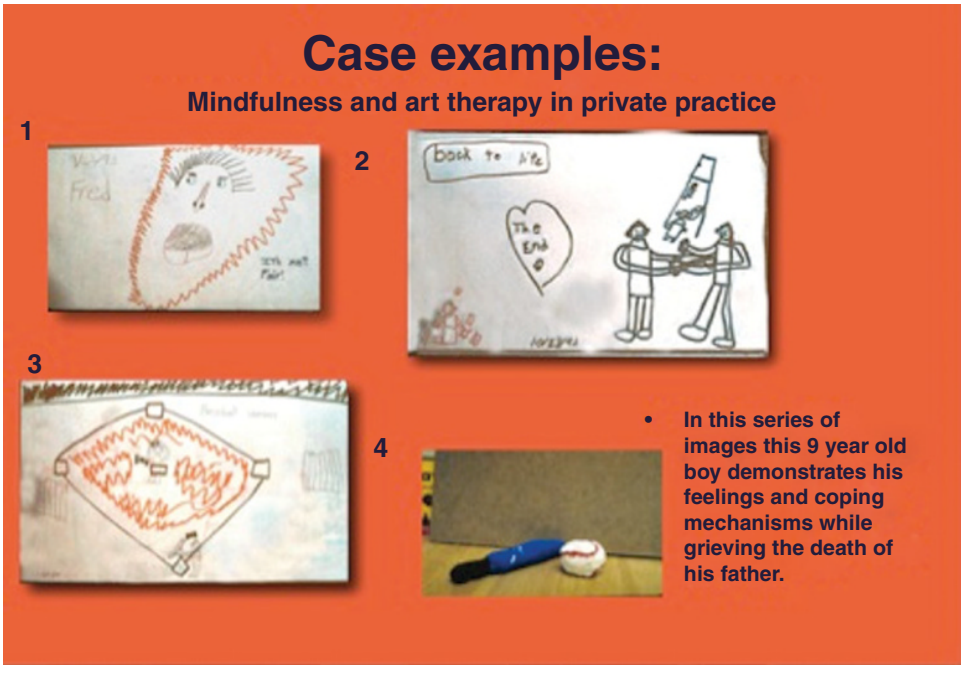

Figure 9.4 Process of grief work.

Figure 9.5 Hanging together beautifully; separate but united.

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Conclusion

The integration of art therapy with positive psychology is a rich and valuable collaboration toward the pursuit of well-being and optimal functioning. Art therapy has the potential of motivating clients to reveal more of who they are to themselves. Much needs to be researched and written on this vital work.

In my own personal and professional process, I have realized the importance of contributing one's skills as a positive art therapist beyond self-awareness and clinical treatment strategies. It is crucial for art therapists and related professionals to take an active role as catalysts for positive change and growth. Together, helping professionals can find and invigorate ways to promote and guide others to discover their extraordinary talents and strengths through leadership, community service, art activism, and ongoing research.

Endnote

1 To determine strengths and virtues, several assessment tools are available free of charge on the website www.authentichappiness.org.

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